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ABSTRACT

Those responsible for coordinating flexible and open learning in colleges should consider whether the time may be right to seek common ground on the issues and principles shared by the many related initiatives in Great Britain during the last two decades. Two principles that are important to flexible learning are that education's effectiveness is measured by the extent to which it enhances the individual's self-esteem and/or progression through qualification: and that the student must be actively engaged in learning. The initiatives have included distance learning, individualized instruction integrated assignments, and open learning, including the Open University and Open Tech. An understanding of the need for counseling and tutorial support has emerged, and, consequently, the terms "supported self-study" and "personal development plans" have tended to replace terms such as "open learning." Less attention is now paid to materials production and more to the following activities: (1) accreditation; (2) modularization of courses; (3) evaluation and adaption of materials; and (4) implementation of student support and staff development. Many initiatives have failed to become fully embedded across their host institutions. When embedding occurs, the focus of control of the learning process moves toward the learner. One way to embed flexible learning is to use an in-college flexible learning workshop for the college's own staff development. (CML)

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This bulletin is aimed primarily at those responsible for co-ordinating flexible and open learning in colleges. It will also be of interest to those responsible for managing staff development. It gives an overview of the many initiatives in further and higher education which have led to the provision of a more learner-centred approach to the delivery of the curriculum and suggests that these various packets of expertise may be usefully integrated and developed as a college tries to embed flexible learning into its mainstream provision. This might be done by providing some, if not all, staff development through a flexible staff development unit. At the end of the bulletin is an invitation to participate in a new FEU project, 'Flexible Learning Audit' (RP555). FEU intends to follow up this bulletin with a Flexible Learning Newsletter *which will report on FEU work and also update the field on developments in flexible learning.*

Flexible Learning in Perspective

Background

During the last two decades there have been many initiatives concerned with flexibility in learning and training, ranging from programmed learning in the 1960s to more recent open learning developments such as the Open College. Many of the recent changes have been the result of government pressure to make FHE institutions more flexible in their response to the needs of industry.

The pace of change has been such that many groups of professionals have become involved in flexible learning provision at different times. They have developed separately and have not been able to consolidate their position prior to moving into the 1990s. Some began with programmed learning and perhaps moved on to audio-visual resources, educational technology and resource-based learning. MSC's Open Tech programme and the various flexistudy schemes promoted an open learning community often separated from the mainstream of FHE. Similarly, the training technologist, perhaps having a background in information technology, saw a technological solution to the need to improve accessibility of education and training.

Despite sometimes apparently quite separate concerns, these innovations often face similar organisational issues in their attempts to embed flexible learning into the mainstream of FHE. Furthermore, they share the same educational principles. The time is perhaps right to restate these and seek the common ground that integrates the many interpretations of the term 'flexible learning'. Of late, 'open learning' has become over-identified with the need to market education and

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training and, in this climate, there is a tendency to forget educational principles and the needs of learners which should always remain at the heart of any educational or training initiative.

Educational principles

Any educational or training opportunity must first and foremost address the needs of the learner, whether these needs are related to employment or broader life contexts. The effectiveness of education and training is measured by the extent to which it enhances the individual in the context of progression through qualification and/or in terms of greater self-esteem. Opening the educational process is then seen as an inevitable consequence of trying to be more effective in meeting the needs of individual learners. This learner-centred focus is fundamental to all flexible learning as is the belief that the student must be actively engaged in learning rather than be the passive recipient of knowledge. Thus the student should have some control over the his or her own learning, thereby developing greater autonomy.

Ways of seeing flexible learning

In order to clarify the facets of flexible learning it would be helpful to look at the many terms that are associated with the different developments already mentioned.

Correspondence colleges have been in existence for several decades and they pioneered the use of *distance learning*. In the 1960s and early 1970s the term *individualised instruction* became associated with the promise of programmed learning. It was claimed that carefully structured programmed learning material, giving regular feedback to the student on progress, allowed the needs of individual students to be better met than through traditional teaching, especially if the material contained remedial help. These approaches did allow students *choice in time, pace and place of learning*. Unfortunately, programmed learning was often highly didactic and structured giving students little or no control in the learning process. The unreliable and cumbersome programmed learning machines were often dismissed as automatic page-turners. However, many of the principles, such as *learner centredness* and structured materials (with clear aims and objectives), were carried forward into a general commitment to *resource-based learning*, often including the use of various media. This was sometimes associated with a general commitment to make best use of college libraries and developments in resource-based learning, often worked in tandem with the development of library resources.

The same learning principles are enshrined in the growing commitment to *integrated assignments*, such as in the development of the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) and Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) courses which again emphasise the active participation of students in their own learning. As before, a more open relationship between teacher and student was stressed and the teacher became a learning manager or facilitator. Of necessity, the classroom became the *workshop* and attempts to cater for the needs of individual students were made possible by the collection of banks of learning resources. Underpinning the development of integrated assignments is the belief that learning experiences should be more like the real problems that confront students both at home and at work. In order to work effectively, this approach also requires a more open relationship between teaching/tutoring staff, often embodied in the course team.

The most important national initiative in *open learning* was undoubtedly the Open University, which set new standards in both materials production and student support for degree and post-degree level studies. At the same time, many colleges were developing various forms of *flexistudy* which allowed them to reach a new student client who, for various reasons, was unable to attend a college at a regular time. In vocational education/training, MSC's Open Tech initiative attempted to make FHE more responsive to the needs of employers through the vehicle of open learning. In many ways Open Tech could be seen as an attempt to enshrine the principles of open learning at an institutional level, particularly trying to generate a more open and responsive relationship between colleges and employers. This was tackled through the generation of open learning materials.

Through these various initiatives, a growing understanding of the need for *counselling and tutorial support* gradually emerged. This is perhaps best recognised in the gradual dropping of the term open learning in favour of the terms like *supported self-study* and *personal development plans*. Also the use of the term *flexible learning workshops* within MSC (now the Training Agency) and elsewhere begins to recognise all the other facets of open learning that have been mentioned. There is now less concern with the funding of materials production and more concentration on the need for national *accreditation*, the *modularisation* of courses, the *evaluation and adaptation of*

materials and the implementation of *student support and staff development*. This is the result of the recognition that the Open Tech programme perhaps concentrated too much on materials production, with insufficient attention being given to the implementation of appropriate learning systems, at institutional level, necessary for the embedding of open learning in FHE.

The MSC/Training Agency has also supported the application of new technologies to open learning, using *computer-based training, interactive video* and *expert systems*. It is often the case that the new breed of 'training technologist' has brought over the same didactic pedagogy that was embedded in the original programmed learning. Although such technologies offer exciting possibilities for open learning they have sometimes been developed in isolation from the lessons learned by previous generations of educational technologists. Their supporters are sometimes tempted to believe that the problems of implementation can be solved by the development of more powerful *courseware*. However, all open learning materials require appropriate support systems to ensure effective learning/training. Technologies like *electronic mail* and *computer conferencing* are really only in their infancy but they offer exciting new opportunities for the delivery of student support which are not necessarily bound by existing educational institutions.

New hardware to support the use of information technology across the curriculum is often managed by computing specialists. The potential for computer-assisted learning (CAL) has meant that those with a general interest in learning resources wished to capitalise on the new learning opportunities presented by the technology. Latterly, the concentration on the vocational applications of information technology has led to less emphasis on CAL and more on vocational applications of standard software applications packages. However, the nature of student computing activity has inevitably led to a workshop approach in the teaching of IT awareness. It is therefore unfortunate that those with the responsibility for learning resources, often with expertise in materials production and learning workshop management, are sometimes separated from those with responsibility for IT awareness.

Embedding flexible learning in FHE

Many of the initiatives discussed have failed to become fully embedded across their host institutions. The outward sign of such embedding is the change in the teacher-student relationship to that of tutor-learner, with the focus of control of the learning process moving toward the learner. Embedding across the institution implies that such changes would be taking place at all levels and in all subjects. Even if colleges have become responsive at institutional level by running new courses for groups of clients or employers, this does not necessarily imply that the pedagogic principles of flexible learning have become embedded at student level. Indeed such courses, even if they make good use of open learning with proper student support, might still be seen as peripheral to the mainstream work. MSC's report on its Open Tech programme suggested that the first requirement for embedding flexible learning into LEA/college provision would be its inclusion in LEA/college policy.

Flexible learning workshops

Many colleges have already taken steps to embed open learning into their mainstream provision by developing flexible learning workshops to provide core provision across the college. Typically these might include workshops for numeracy, communication skills and information technology. Some examples have already been documented in *Learning Workshops* (Longman for FEU, 1987). In *Implementing Open Learning in Local Authority Insitutions* (FEU/Open Learning Branch, MSC, 1988) it was suggested that open learning is only likely to become cost-effective if a college makes the commitment to provide some part of its mainstream provision through open or flexible learning.

An interesting way to embed flexible learning in a college might be to use an in-college flexible learning workshop as a vehicle for the college's own staff development and FEU is particularly interested in contacting any colleges committed to this strategy.

The way forward

FEU remains firmly committed to the pedagogic principles enshrined in the best examples of flexible learning and would wish to see a move toward greater learner autonomy in all learning opportunities provided by FHE colleges. Experience to date has led to a recognition that funding the production of open learning materials alone is unlikely to result in the effective embedding of flexible learning; careful attention has

to be given to the learning systems required to support flexibility, including the necessary student support and staff development.

The time is right for colleges to integrate their experience of learner-centred pedagogies in a concerted effort to embed flexible learning across the institution. A commitment to flexible learning at policy level is the first step. It is probable that a more open and flexible management structure will be needed to implement such a policy, together with a firm commitment for extra resources, especially for the necessary staff development. The use of flexible learning workshops for a college's own staff development could have a catalytic effect in the embedding of flexible learning across an institution.

An audit of flexible learning in FE

There is a lot of interest in flexible learning in colleges and LEAs, partly fuelled by the funding that has been made available for flexible learning workshops through the Mutual Development Fund of the Training Agency. FEU intends to survey the extent that flexible learning is becoming embedded into the mainstream provision of colleges through a *Flexible Learning Audit* project to be conducted by the National Extension College. In this project we intend to make good use of other work that has recently been done in this area, notably by the Colleges of FHE Group of the Library Association and the Learning Resources Development Group (LRDG).

Through the project we will gain:

- a snapshot of examples of the ways that colleges and authorities are embedding flexible learning into their mainstram provision;
- a clearer idea of the issues that face colleges and LEAs in their efforts to provide more flexible mainstream provision;
- recommendations and guidelines for those institutions about to commit themselves to flexible learning in mainstream provision.

If any college not yet aware of this project would like to be included in the Audit, please contact Roger Merritt at the National Extension College, 18 Brooklands Avenue, Cambridge CB2 2HN (0223 316644).

Any college that is willing to provide case study material or would like to comment on the content of this bulletin is invited to contact Peter Trethewey at FEU, 2 Orange Street, London WC2H 7WE (01-321 0433 ext. 235 or TTNS mailbox TCD100195)

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